

A Book of Myths

Written by
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Edited & Published by



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By

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WITH SIXTEEN ORIGINAL DRAWINGS IN COLOUR BY
HELEN STRATTON

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PREFACE

Just as a little child holds out its hands to catch the sunbeams, to feel and to grasp what, so its eyes tell it, is actually there, so, down through the ages, men have stretched out their hands in eager endeavour to know their God. And because only through the human was the divine knowable, the old peoples of the earth made gods of their heroes and not unfrequently endowed these gods with as many of the vices as of the virtues of their worshippers. As we read the myths of the East and the West we find ever the same story. That portion of the ancient Aryan race which poured from the central plain of Asia, through the rocky defiles of what we now call "The Frontier," to populate the fertile lowlands of India, had gods who must once have been wholly heroic, but who came in time to be more degraded than the most vicious of lustful criminals. And the Greeks, Latins, Teutons, Celts, and Slavonians, who came of the same mighty Aryan stock, did even as those with whom they owned a common ancestry. Originally they gave to their gods of their best. All that was noblest in them, all that was strongest and most selfless, all the higher instincts of their natures were their endowment. And although their worship in time became corrupt and lost its beauty, there yet remains for us, in the old tales of the gods, a wonderful humanity that strikes a vibrant chord in the hearts of those who are the descendants of their worshippers. For though creeds and forms may change, human nature never changes. We are less simple than our fathers: that is all. And, as Professor York Powell^[1] most truly says: "It is not in a man's creed, but in his

deeds; not in his knowledge, but in his sympathy, that there lies the essence of what is good and of what will last in human life.”

The most usual habits of mind in our own day are the theoretical and analytical habits. Dissection, vivisection, analysis—those are the processes to which all things not conclusively historical and all things spiritual are bound to pass. Thus we find the old myths classified into Sun Myths and Dawn Myths, Earth Myths and Moon Myths, Fire Myths and Wind Myths, until, as one of the most sane and vigorous thinkers of the present day^[2] has justly observed: “If you take the rhyme of Mary and her little lamb, and call Mary the sun and the lamb the moon, you will achieve astonishing results, both in religion and astronomy, when you find that the lamb followed Mary to school one day.”

In this little collection of Myths, the stories are not presented to the student of folklore as a fresh contribution to his knowledge. Rather is the book intended for those who, in the course of their reading, frequently come across names which possess for them no meaning, and who care to read some old stories, through which runs the same humanity that their own hearts know. For although the old worship has passed away, it is almost impossible for us to open a book that does not contain some mention of the gods of long ago. In our childhood we are given copies of Kingsley’s *Heroes* and of Hawthorne’s *Tanglewood Tales*. Later on, we find in Shakespeare, Spenser, Milton, Keats, Shelley, Longfellow, Tennyson, Mrs. Browning, and a host of other writers, constant allusion to the stories of the gods. Scarcely a poet has ever written but makes mention of them in one or other of his poems. It would seem as if there were no get-away from them. We might expect in this twentieth century that the old gods of Greece and of Rome, the gods of our Northern forefathers, the

gods of Egypt, the gods of the British race, might be forgotten. But even when we read in a newspaper of aeroplanes, someone is more than likely to quote the story of Bellerophon and his winged steed, or of Icarus, the flyer, and in our daily speech the names of gods and goddesses continually crop up. We drive—or, at least, till lately we drove—in Phaetons. Not only schoolboys swear by Jove or by Jupiter. The silvery substance in our thermometers and barometers is named Mercury. Blacksmiths are accustomed to being referred to as “sons of Vulcan,” and beautiful youths to being called “young Adonises.” We accept the names of newspapers and debating societies as being the “Argus,” without perhaps quite realising who was Argus, the many-eyed. We talk of “a panic,” and forget that the great god Pan is father of the word. Even in our religious services we go back to heathenism. Not only are the crockets on our cathedral spires and church pews remnants of fire-worship, but one of our own most beautiful Christian blessings is probably of Assyrian origin. “The Lord bless thee and keep thee.... The Lord make His face to shine upon thee.... The Lord lift up the light of His countenance upon thee....” So did the priests of the sun-gods invoke blessings upon those who worshipped.

We make many discoveries as we study the myths of the North and of the South. In the story of Baldur we find that the goddess Hel ultimately gave her name to the place of punishment precious to the Calvinistic mind. And because the Norseman very much disliked the bitter, cruel cold of the long winter, his heaven was a warm, well-fired abode, and his place of punishment one of terrible frigidity. Somewhere on the other side of the Tweed and Cheviots was the spot selected by the Celt of southern Britain. On the other hand, the eastern mind, which knew the terrors of a sun-

smitten land and of a heat that was torture, had for a hell a fiery place of constantly burning flames.

In the space permitted, it has not been possible to deal with more than a small number of myths, and the well-known stories of Herakles, of Theseus, and of the Argonauts have been purposely omitted. These have been so perfectly told by great writers that to retell them would seem absurd. The same applies to the Odyssey and the Iliad, the translations of which probably take rank amongst the finest translations in any language.

The writer will feel that her object has been gained should any readers of these stories feel that for a little while they have left the toilful utilitarianism of the present day behind them, and, with it, its hampering restrictions of sordid actualities that are so murderous to imagination and to all romance.

“Great God! I’d rather beA Pagan suckled in a creed outworn;So might I, standing on this pleasant lea,Have glimpses that would make me less forlorn;Have sight of Proteus rising from the sea;Or hear old Triton blow his wreathèd horn.”

JEAN LANG.

POSTSCRIPT

We have come, in those last long months, to date our happenings as they have never until now been dated by those of our own generation.

We speak of things that took place “**BEFORE THE WAR**”; and between that time and this stands a barrier immeasurable.

This book, with its Preface, was completed in 1914—“**BEFORE THE WAR.**”

Since August 1914 the finest humanity of our race has been enduring Promethean agonies. But even as Prometheus unflinchingly bore the cruelties of pain, of heat and of cold, of hunger and of thirst, and the tortures inflicted by an obscene bird of prey, so have endured the men of our nation and of those nations with whom we are proud to be allied. Much more remote than they seemed one little year ago, now seem the old stories of sunny Greece. But if we have studied the strange transmogrification of the ancient gods, we can look with interest, if with horror, at the Teuton representation of the GOD in whom we believe as a GOD of perfect purity, of honour, and of love. According to their interpretation of Him, the God of the Huns would seem to be as much a confederate of the vicious as the most degraded god of ancient worship. And if we turn with shame from the Divinity so often and so glibly referred to by blasphemous lips, and look on a picture that tears our hearts, and yet makes our hearts big with pride, we can understand how it was that those heroes who fought and died in the Valley of the Scamander came in time to be regarded not as men, but as gods.

There is no tale in all the world's mythology finer than the tale that began in August 1914. How future generations will tell the tale, who can say?

But we, for whom Life can never be the same again, can say with all earnestness: “It is the memory that the soldier leaves behind him, like the long train of light that follows the sunken sun—that is all which is worth caring for, which distinguishes the death of the brave or the ignoble.”

And, surely, to all those who are fighting, and suffering, and dying for a noble cause, the GOD of gods, the GOD of battles, who is also the GOD of peace, and the GOD of Love, has become an ever near and eternally living entity.

“Our little systems have their day;They have their day and cease to be,They are but broken lights of Thee,And Thou, oh Lord, art more than they.”

JEAN LANG.

FOOTNOTES:

[1] *Teutonic Heathendom.*

[2] John Kelman, D.D., *Among Famous Books.*

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PROMETHEUS AND PANDORA

Those who are interested in watching the mental development of a child must have noted that when the baby has learned to speak even a little, it begins to show its growing intelligence by asking questions. “What is this?” it would seem at first to ask with regard to simple things that to it are still mysteries. Soon it arrives at the more far-reaching inquiries—“Why is this so?” “How did this happen?” And as the child’s mental growth continues, the painstaking and conscientious parent or guardian is many times faced by questions which lack of knowledge, or a sensitive honesty, prevents him from answering either with assurance or with ingenuity.

As with the child, so it has ever been with the human race. Man has always come into the world asking “How?” “Why?” “What?” and so the Hebrew, the Greek, the Maori, the Australian blackfellow, the Norseman—in a word, each race of mankind—has formed for itself an explanation of existence, an answer to the questions of the groping child-mind—“Who made the world?” “What is God?” “What made a God think of fire and air and water?” “Why am I, I?”

Into the explanation of creation and existence given by the Greeks come the stories of Prometheus and of Pandora. The world, as first it was, to the Greeks was such a world as the one of which we read in the Book of Genesis—“without form, and void.” It was a sunless world in which land, air, and sea were mixed up together, and over which reigned a deity called Chaos. With him ruled the goddess of Night and their son was Erebus, god of Darkness. When the two beautiful children of Erebus, Light and

Day, had flooded formless space with their radiance, Eros, the god of Love, was born, and Light and Day and Love, working together, turned discord into harmony and made the earth, the sea, and the sky into one perfect whole. A giant race, a race of Titans, in time populated this newly-made earth, and of these one of the mightiest was Prometheus. To him, and to his brother Epimetheus, was entrusted by Eros the distribution of the gifts of faculties and of instincts to all the living creatures in the world, and the task of making a creature lower than the gods, something less great than the Titans, yet in knowledge and in understanding infinitely higher than the beasts and birds and fishes. At the hands of the Titan brothers, birds, beasts, and fishes had fared handsomely. They were Titanic in their generosity, and so prodigal had they been in their gifts that when they would fain have carried out the commands of Eros they found that nothing was left for the equipment of this being, to be called Man. Yet, nothing daunted, Prometheus took some clay from the ground at his feet, moistened it with water, and fashioned it into an image, in form like the gods. Into its nostrils Eros breathed the spirit of life, Pallas Athené endowed it with a soul, and the first man looked wonderingly round on the earth that was to be his heritage. Prometheus, proud of the beautiful thing of his own creation, would fain have given Man a worthy gift, but no gift remained for him. He was naked, unprotected, more helpless than any of the beasts of the field, more to be pitied than any of them in that he had a soul to suffer.

Surely Zeus, the All Powerful, ruler of Olympus, would have compassion on Man? But Prometheus looked to Zeus in vain; compassion he had none. Then, in infinite pity, Prometheus

bethought himself of a power belonging to the gods alone and unshared by any living creature on the earth.

“We shall give Fire to the Man whom we have made,” he said to Epimetheus. To Epimetheus this seemed an impossibility, but to Prometheus nothing was impossible. He bided his time and, unseen by the gods, he made his way into Olympus, lighted a hollow torch with a spark from the chariot of the Sun and hastened back to earth with this royal gift to Man. Assuredly no other gift could have brought him more completely the empire that has since been his. No longer did he tremble and cower in the darkness of caves when Zeus hurled his lightnings across the sky. No more did he dread the animals that hunted him and drove him in terror before them.

Armed with fire, the beasts became his vassals. With fire he forged weapons, defied the frost and cold, coined money, made implements for tillage, introduced the arts, and was able to destroy as well as to create.

From his throne on Olympus, Zeus looked down on the earth and saw, with wonder, airy columns of blue-grey smoke that curled upwards to the sky. He watched more closely, and realised with terrible wrath that the moving flowers of red and gold that he saw in that land that the Titans shared with men, came from fire, that had hitherto been the gods’ own sacred power. Speedily he assembled a council of the gods to mete out to Prometheus a punishment fit for the blasphemous daring of his crime. This council decided at length to create a thing that should for evermore charm the souls and hearts of men, and yet, for evermore, be man’s undoing.

To Vulcan, god of fire, whose province Prometheus had insulted, was given the work of fashioning out of clay and water the creature by which the honour of the gods was to be avenged. “The lame Vulcan,” says Hesiod, poet of Greek mythology, “formed out of the earth an image resembling a chaste virgin. Pallas Athené, of the blue eyes, hastened to ornament her and to robe her in a white tunic. She dressed on the crown of her head a long veil, skilfully fashioned and admirable to see; she crowned her forehead with graceful garlands of newly-opened flowers and a golden diadem that the lame Vulcan, the illustrious god, had made with his own hands to please the puissant Jove. On this crown Vulcan had chiselled the innumerable animals that the continents and the sea nourish in their bosoms, all endowed with a marvellous grace and apparently alive. When he had finally completed, instead of some useful work, this illustrious masterpiece, he brought into the assembly this virgin, proud of the ornaments with which she had been decked by the blue-eyed goddess, daughter of a powerful sire.” To this beautiful creature, destined by the gods to be man’s destroyer, each of them gave a gift. From Aphrodite she got beauty, from Apollo music, from Hermes the gift of a winning tongue. And when all that great company in Olympus had bestowed their gifts, they named the woman Pandora—“Gifted by all the Gods.” Thus equipped for victory, Pandora was led by Hermes to the world that was thenceforward to be her home. As a gift from the gods she was presented to Prometheus.

But Prometheus, gazing in wonder at the violet blue eyes bestowed by Aphrodite, that looked wonderingly back into his own as if they were indeed as innocent as two violets wet with the morning dew, hardened his great heart, and would have none of her. As a hero—a worthy descendant of Titans—said in later years,

“Timeo Danaos et dona ferentes,”—“I fear the Greeks, even when they bring gifts.” And Prometheus, the greatly-daring, knowing that he merited the anger of the gods, saw treachery in a gift outwardly so perfect. Not only would he not accept this exquisite creature for his own, but he hastened to caution his brother also to refuse her.

But well were they named Prometheus (Forethought) and Epimethus (Afterthought). For Epimethus it was enough to look at this peerless woman, sent from the gods, for him to love her and to believe in her utterly. She was the fairest thing on earth, worthy indeed of the deathless gods who had created her. Perfect, too, was the happiness that she brought with her to Epimethus. Before her coming, as he well knew now, the fair world had been incomplete. Since she came the fragrant flowers had grown more sweet for him, the song of the birds more full of melody. He found new life in Pandora and marvelled how his brother could ever have fancied that she could bring to the world aught but peace and joyousness.

Now when the gods had entrusted to the Titan brothers the endowment of all living things upon the earth, they had been careful to withhold everything that might bring into the world pain, sickness, anxiety, bitterness of heart, remorse, or soul-crushing sorrow. All these hurtful things were imprisoned in a coffer which was given into the care of the trusty Epimethus.

To Pandora the world into which she came was all fresh, all new, quite full of unexpected joys and delightful surprises. It was a world of mystery, but mystery of which her great, adoring, simple Titan held the golden key. When she saw the coffer which never was opened, what then more natural than that she should ask

Epimethus what it contained? But the contents were known only to the gods. Epimethus was unable to answer. Day by day, the curiosity of Pandora increased. To her the gods had never given anything but good. Surely there must be here gifts more precious still. What if the Olympians had destined her to be the one to open the casket, and had sent her to earth in order that she might bestow on this dear world, on the men who lived on it, and on her own magnificent Titan, happiness and blessings which only the minds of gods could have conceived? Thus did there come a day when Pandora, unconscious instrument in the hands of a vengeful Olympian, in all faith, and with the courage that is born of faith and of love, opened the lid of the prison-house of evil. And as from coffers in the old Egyptian tombs, the live plague can still rush forth and slay, the long-imprisoned evils rushed forth upon the fair earth and on the human beings who lived on it—malignant, ruthless, fierce, treacherous, and cruel—poisoning, slaying, devouring. Plague and pestilence and murder, envy and malice and revenge and all viciousness—an ugly wolf-pack indeed was that one let loose by Pandora. Terror, doubt, misery, had all rushed straightway to attack her heart, while the evils of which she had never dreamed stung mind and soul into dismay and horror, when, by hastily shutting the lid of the coffer, she tried to undo the evil she had done.

And lo, she found that the gods had imprisoned one good gift only in this Inferno of horrors and of ugliness. In the world there had never been any need of Hope. What work was there for Hope to do where all was perfect, and where each creature possessed the desire of body and of heart? Therefore Hope was thrust into the chest that held the evils, a star in a black night, a lily growing on a dung-heap. And as Pandora, white-lipped and trembling, looked

into the otherwise empty box, courage came back to her heart, and Epimetheus let fall to his side the arm that would have slain the woman of his love because there came to him, like a draught of wine to a warrior spent in battle, an imperial vision of the sons of men through all the aeons to come, combatting all evils of body and of soul, going on conquering and to conquer. Thus, saved by Hope, the Titan and the woman faced the future, and for them the vengeance of the gods was stayed.

“Yet I argue not Against Heav’n’s hand or will, nor bate a jot Of heart or hope; but still bear up and steer Right onward.”

So spoke Milton, the blind Titan of the seventeenth century; and Shakespeare says:

“True hope is swift, and flies with swallow’s wings; Kings it makes gods, and meaner creatures kings.”

Upon the earth, and on the children of men who were as gods in their knowledge and mastery of the force of fire, Jupiter had had his revenge. For Prometheus he reserved another punishment. He, the greatly-daring, once the dear friend and companion of Zeus himself, was chained to a rock on Mount Caucasus by the vindictive deity. There, on a dizzy height, his body thrust against the sun-baked rock, Prometheus had to endure the torment of having a foul-beaked vulture tear out his liver, as though he were a piece of carrion lying on the mountain side. All day, while the sun mercilessly smote him and the blue sky turned from red to black before his pain-racked eyes, the torture went on. Each night, when the filthy bird of prey that worked the will of the gods spread its dark wings and flew back to its eyrie, the Titan endured the cruel mercy of having his body grow whole once more. But with daybreak there came again the silent shadow, the smell

of the unclean thing, and again with fierce beak and talons the vulture greedily began its work.

Thirty thousand years was the time of his sentence, and yet Prometheus knew that at any moment he could have brought his torment to an end. A secret was his—a mighty secret, the revelation of which would have brought him the mercy of Zeus and have reinstated him in the favour of the all-powerful god. Yet did he prefer to endure his agonies rather than to free himself by bowing to the desires of a tyrant who had caused Man to be made, yet denied to Man those gifts that made him nobler than the beasts and raised him almost to the heights of the Olympians. Thus for him the weary centuries dragged by—in suffering that knew no respite—in endurance that the gods might have ended. Prometheus had brought an imperial gift to the men that he had made, and imperially he paid the penalty.

“Three thousand years of sleep-unsheltered hours,And moments
aye divided by keen pangsTill they seemed years, torture and
solitude,Scorn and despair,—these are mine empire.More glorious
far than that which thou surveyestFrom thine unenvied throne, O,
Mighty God!Almighty, had I deigned to share the shameOf thine
ill tyranny, and hung not hereNailed to this wall of eagle-baffling
mountain,Black, wintry, dead, unmeasured; without herb,Insect,
or beast, or shape or sound of life.Ah me! alas, pain, pain ever, for
ever!”

SHELLEY.

“Titan! to whose immortal eyesThe sufferings of mortalitySeen in
their sad reality, Were not as things that gods despise;What
was thy pity’s recompense?A silent suffering, and intense;The
rock, the vulture, and the chain,All that the proud can feel of

pain,The agony they do not show,The suffocating sense of
woe,Which speaks but in its loneliness,And then is jealous lest the
skyShould have a listener, nor will sighUntil its voice is echoless.”

BYRON.

“Yet, I am still Prometheus, wiser grownBy years of solitude,—that
holds apartThe past and future, giving the soul roomTo search
into itself,—and long communeWith this eternal silence;—more a
god,In my long-suffering and strength to meetWith equal front
the direst shafts of fate,Than thou in thy faint-hearted despotism
...Therefore, great heart, bear up! thou art but typeOf what all
lofty spirits endure that fainWould win men back to strength and
peace through love:Each hath his lonely peak, and on each
heartEnvy, or scorn or hatred tears lifelongWith vulture beak; yet
the high soul is left;And faith, which is but hope grown wise, and
loveAnd patience, which at last shall overcome.”

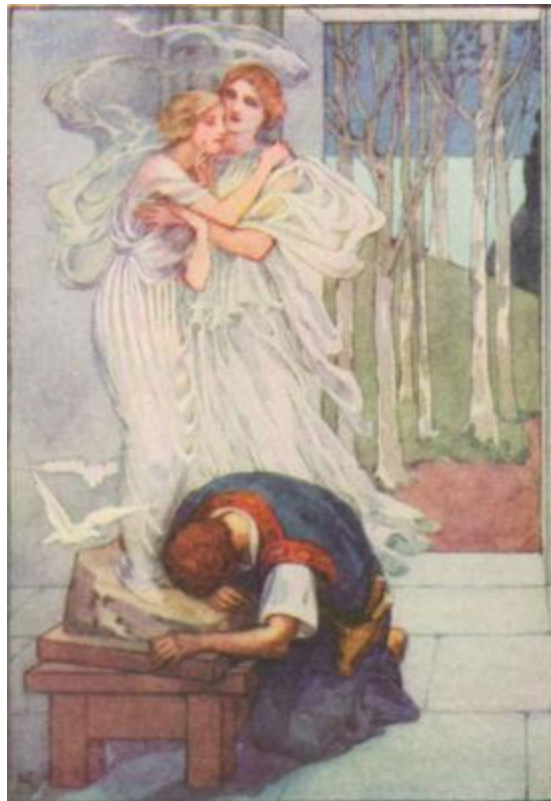
LOWELL.

PYGMALION

In days when the world was young and when the gods walked on the earth, there reigned over the island of Cyprus a sculptor-king, and king of sculptors, named Pygmalion. In the language of our own day, we should call him “wedded to his art.” In woman he only saw the bane of man. Women, he believed, lured men from the paths to which their destiny called them. While man walked alone, he walked free—he had given no “hostages to fortune.” Alone, man could live for his art, could combat every danger that beset him, could escape, unhampered, from every pitfall in life. But woman was the ivy that clings to the oak, and throttles the oak in the end. No woman, vowed Pygmalion, should ever hamper him. And so at length he came to hate women, and, free of heart and mind, his genius wrought such great things that he became a very perfect sculptor. He had one passion, a passion for his art, and that sufficed him. Out of great rough blocks of marble he would hew the most perfect semblance of men and of women, and of everything that seemed to him most beautiful and the most worth preserving.

When we look now at the Venus of Milo, at the Diana of Versailles, and at the Apollo Belvidere in the Vatican, we can imagine what were the greater things that the sculptor of Cyprus freed from the dead blocks of marble. One day as he chipped and chiselled there came to him, like the rough sketch of a great picture, the semblance of a woman. How it came he knew not. Only he knew that in that great mass of pure white stone there seemed to be imprisoned the exquisite image of a woman, a woman that he must set free. Slowly, gradually, the woman came.

Soon he knew that she was the most beautiful thing that his art had ever wrought. All that he had ever thought that a woman **SHOULD** be, this woman was. Her form and features were all most perfect, and so perfect were they, that he felt very sure that, had she been a woman indeed, most perfect would have been the soul within. For her he worked as he had never worked before. There came, at last, a day when he felt that another touch would be insult to the exquisite thing he had created. He laid his chisel aside and sat down to gaze at the Perfect Woman. She seemed to gaze back at him. Her parted lips were ready to speak—to smile. Her hands were held out to hold his hands. Then Pygmalion covered his eyes. He, the hater of women, loved a woman—a woman of chilly marble. The women he had scorned were avenged.



THEN PYGMALION COVERED HIS EYES

Day by day his passion for the woman of his own creation grew and grew. His hands no longer wielded the chisel. They grew idle. He would stand under the great pines and gaze across the sapphire-blue sea, and dream strange dreams of a marble woman who walked across the waves with arms outstretched, with smiling lips, and who became a woman of warm flesh and blood when her bare feet touched the yellow sand, and the bright sun of Cyprus touched her marble hair and turned it into hair of living gold. Then he would hasten back to his studio to find the miracle still unaccomplished, and would passionately kiss the little cold hands, and lay beside the little cold feet the presents he knew that young girls loved—bright shells and exquisite precious stones, gorgeous-hued birds and fragrant flowers, shining amber, and beads that sparkled and flashed with all the most lovely combinations of colour that the mind of artist could devise. Yet more he did, for he spent vast sums on priceless pearls and hung them in her ears and upon her cold white breast; and the merchants wondered who could be the one upon whom Pygmalion lavished the money from his treasury.

To his divinity he gave a name—"Galatea"; and always on still nights the myriad silver stars would seem to breathe to him "Galatea" ... and on those days when the tempests blew across the sandy wastes of Arabia and churned up the fierce white surf on the rocks of Cyprus, the very spirit of the storm seemed to moan through the crash of waves in longing, hopeless and unutterable—"Galatea!... Galatea!..." For her he decked a couch with Tyrian purple, and on the softest of pillows he laid the beautiful head of the marble woman that he loved.

So the time wore on until the festival of Aphrodite drew near. Smoke from many altars curled out to sea, the odour of incense

mingled with the fragrance of the great pine trees, and garlanded victims lowed and bleated as they were led to the sacrifice. As the leader of his people, Pygmalion faithfully and perfectly performed all his part in the solemnities and at last he was left beside the altar to pray alone. Never before had his words faltered as he laid his petitions before the gods, but on this day he spoke not as a sculptor-king, but as a child who was half afraid of what he asked.

“O Aphrodite!” he said, “who can do all things, give me, I pray you, one like my Galatea for my wife!”

“Give me my Galatea,” he dared not say; but Aphrodite knew well the words he would fain have uttered, and smiled to think how Pygmalion at last was on his knees. In token that his prayer was answered, three times she made the flames on the altar shoot up in a fiery point, and Pygmalion went home, scarcely daring to hope, not allowing his gladness to conquer his fear.

The shadows of evening were falling as he went into the room that he had made sacred to Galatea. On the purple-covered couch she lay, and as he entered it seemed as though she met his eyes with her own; almost it seemed that she smiled at him in welcome. He quickly went up to her and, kneeling by her side, he pressed his lips on those lips of chilly marble. So many times he had done it before, and always it was as though the icy lips that could never live sent their chill right through his heart, but now it surely seemed to him that the lips were cold no longer. He felt one of the little hands, and no more did it remain heavy and cold and stiff in his touch, but lay in his own hand, soft and living and warm. He softly laid his fingers on the marble hair, and lo, it was the soft and wavy burnished golden hair of his desire. Again, reverently as he had laid his offerings that day on the altar of Venus,

Pygmalion kissed her lips. And then did Galatea, with warm and rosy cheeks, widely open her eyes, like pools in a dark mountain stream on which the sun is shining, and gaze with timid gladness into his own.

There are no after tales of Pygmalion and Galatea. We only know that their lives were happy and that to them was born a son, Paphos, from whom the city sacred to Aphrodite received its name. Perhaps Aphrodite may have smiled sometimes to watch Pygmalion, once the scorner of women, the adoring servant of the woman that his own hands had first designed.

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PHAETON

“The road, to drive on which unskilled were Phaeton’s hands.”

DANTE—*Purgatorio*.

To Apollo, the sun-god, and Clymene, a beautiful ocean-nymph, there was born in the pleasant land of Greece a child to whom was given the name of Phaeton, the Bright and Shining One. The rays of the sun seemed to live in the curls of the fearless little lad, and when at noon other children would seek the cool shade of the cypress groves, Phaeton would hold his head aloft and gaze fearlessly up at the brazen sky from whence fierce heat beat down upon his golden head.

“Behold, my father drives his chariot across the heavens!” he proudly proclaimed. “In a little while I, also, will drive the four snow-white steeds.”

His elders heard the childish boast with a smile, but when Epaphos, half-brother to Apollo, had listened to it many times and beheld the child, Phaeton, grow into an arrogant lad who held himself as though he were indeed one of the Immortals, anger grew in his heart. One day he turned upon Phaeton and spoke in fierce scorn:

“Dost say thou art son of a god? A shameless boaster and a liar art thou! Hast ever spoken to thy divine sire? Give us some proof of thy sonship! No more child of the glorious Apollo art thou than are the vermin his children, that the sun breeds in the dust at my feet.”

For a moment, before the cruel taunt, the lad was stricken into silence, and then, his pride aflame, his young voice shaking with rage and with bitter shame, he cried aloud: "Thou, Epaphos, art the liar. I have but to ask my father, and thou shalt see me drive his golden chariot across the sky."

To his mother he hastened, to get balm for his hurt pride, as many a time he had got it for the little bodily wounds of childhood, and with bursting heart he poured forth his story.

"True it is," he said, "that my father has never deigned to speak to me. Yet I know, because thou hast told me so, that he is my sire. And now my word is pledged. Apollo must let me drive his steeds, else I am for evermore branded braggart and liar, and shamed amongst men."

Clymene listened with grief to his complaint. He was so young, so gallant, so foolish.

"Truly thou art the son of Apollo," she said, "and oh, son of my heart, thy beauty is his, and thy pride the pride of a son of the gods. Yet only partly a god art thou, and though thy proud courage would dare all things, it were mad folly to think of doing what a god alone can do."

But at last she said to him, "Naught that I can say is of any avail. Go, seek thy father, and ask him what thou wilt." Then she told him how he might find the place in the east where Apollo rested ere the labours of the day began, and with eager gladness Phaeton set out upon his journey. A long way he travelled, with never a stop, yet when the glittering dome and jewelled turrets and minarets of the Palace of the Sun came into view, he forgot his

weariness and hastened up the steep ascent to the home of his father.

Phoebus Apollo, clad in purple that glowed like the radiance of a cloud in the sunset sky, sat upon his golden throne. The Day, the Month, and the Year stood by him, and beside them were the Hours. Spring was there, her head wreathed with flowers; Summer, crowned with ripened grain; Autumn, with his feet empurpled by the juice of the grapes; and Winter, with hair all white and stiff with hoar-frost. And when Phaeton walked up the golden steps that led to his father's throne, it seemed as though incarnate Youth had come to join the court of the god of the Sun, and that Youth was so beautiful a thing that it must surely live forever. Proudly did Apollo know him for his son, and when the boy looked in his eyes with the arrogant fearlessness of boyhood, the god greeted him kindly and asked him to tell him why he came, and what was his petition.

As to Clymene, so also to Apollo, Phaeton told his tale, and his father listened, half in pride and amusement, half in puzzled vexation. When the boy stopped, and then breathlessly, with shining eyes and flushed cheeks, ended up his story with: "And, O light of the boundless world, if I am indeed thy son, let it be as I have said, and for one day only let me drive thy chariot across the heavens!" Apollo shook his head and answered very gravely:

"In truth thou art my dear son," he said, "and by the dreadful Styx, the river of the dead, I swear that I will give thee any gift that thou dost name and that will give proof that thy father is the immortal Apollo. But never to thee nor to any other, be he mortal or immortal, shall I grant the boon of driving my chariot."

But the boy pled on:

“I am shamed for ever, my father,” he said. “Surely thou wouldst not have son of thine proved liar and braggart?”

“Not even the gods themselves can do this thing,” answered Apollo. “Nay, not even the almighty Zeus. None but I, Phœbus Apollo, may drive the flaming chariot of the sun, for the way is beset with dangers and none know it but I.”

“Only tell me the way, my father!” cried Phaeton. “So soon I could learn.”

Half in sadness, Apollo smiled.

“The first part of the way is uphill,” he said. “So steep it is that only very slowly can my horses climb it. High in the heavens is the middle, so high that even I grow dizzy when I look down upon the earth and the sea. And the last piece of the way is a precipice that rushes so steeply downward that my hands can scarce check the mad rush of my galloping horses. And all the while, the heaven is spinning round, and the stars with it. By the horns of the Bull I have to drive, past the Archer whose bow is taut and ready to slay, close to where the Scorpion stretches out its arms and the great Crab’s claws grope for a prey....”

“I fear none of these things, oh my father!” cried Phaeton. “Grant that for one day only I drive thy white-maned steeds!”

Very pitifully Apollo looked at him, and for a little space he was silent.

“The little human hands,” he said at length, “the little human frame!—and with them the soul of a god. The pity of it, my son. Dost not know that the boon that thou dost crave from me is Death?”

“Rather Death than Dishonour,” said Phaeton, and proudly he added, “For once would I drive like the god, my father. I have no fear.”

So was Apollo vanquished, and Phaeton gained his heart’s desire.

From the courtyard of the Palace the four white horses were led, and they pawed the air and neighed aloud in the glory of their strength. They drew the chariot whose axle and pole and wheels were of gold, with spokes of silver, while inside were rows of diamonds and of chrysolites that gave dazzling reflection of the sun. Then Apollo anointed the face of Phaeton with a powerful essence that might keep him from being smitten by the flames, and upon his head he placed the rays of the sun. And then the stars went away, even to the Daystar that went last of all, and, at Apollo’s signal, Aurora, the rosy-fingered, threw open the purple gates of the east, and Phaeton saw a path of pale rose-colour open before him.

With a cry of exultation, the boy leapt into the chariot and laid hold of the golden reins. Barely did he hear Apollo’s parting words: “Hold fast the reins, and spare the whip. All thy strength will be wanted to hold the horses in. Go not too high nor too low. The middle course is safest and best. Follow, if thou canst, in the old tracks of my chariot wheels!” His glad voice of thanks for the godlike boon rang back to where Apollo stood and watched him vanishing into the dawn that still was soft in hue as the feathers on the breast of a dove.

Uphill at first the white steeds made their way, and the fire from their nostrils tinged with flame-colour the dark clouds that hung over the land and the sea. With rapture, Phaeton felt that truly he was the son of a god, and that at length he was enjoying his

heritage. The day for which, through all his short life, he had longed, had come at last. He was driving the chariot whose progress even now was awaking the sleeping earth. The radiance from its wheels and from the rays he wore round his head was painting the clouds, and he laughed aloud in rapture as he saw, far down below, the sea and the rivers he had bathed in as a human boy, mirroring the green and rose and purple, and gold and silver, and fierce crimson, that he, Phaeton, was placing in the sky. The grey mist rolled from the mountain tops at his desire. The white fog rolled up from the valleys. All living things awoke; the flowers opened their petals; the grain grew golden; the fruit grew ripe. Could but Epaphos see him now! Surely he must see him, and realise that not Apollo but Phaeton was guiding the horses of his father, driving the chariot of the Sun.

Quicker and yet more quick grew the pace of the white-maned steeds. Soon they left the morning breezes behind, and very soon they knew that these were not the hands of the god, their master, that held the golden reins. Like an air-ship without its accustomed ballast, the chariot rolled unsteadily, and not only the boy's light weight but his light hold on their bridles made them grow mad with a lust for speed. The white foam flew from their mouths like the spume from the giant waves of a furious sea, and their pace was swift as that of a bolt that is cast by the arm of Zeus.

Yet Phaeton had no fear, and when they heard him shout in rapture, "Quicker still, brave ones! more swiftly still!" it made them speed onwards, madly, blindly, with the headlong rush of a storm. There was no hope for them to keep on the beaten track, and soon Phaeton had his rapture checked by the terrible realisation that they had strayed far out of the course and that his

hands were not strong enough to guide them. Close to the Great Bear and the Little Bear they passed, and these were scorched with heat. The Serpent which, torpid, chilly and harmless, lies coiled round the North Pole, felt a warmth that made it grow fierce and harmful again. Downward, ever downward galloped the maddened horses, and soon Phaeton saw the sea as a shield of molten brass, and the earth so near that all things on it were visible. When they passed the Scorpion and only just missed destruction from its menacing fangs, fear entered into the boy's heart. His mother had spoken truth. He was only partly a god, and he was very, very young. In impotent horror he tugged at the reins to try to check the horses' descent, then, forgetful of Apollo's warning, he smote them angrily. But anger met anger, and the fury of the immortal steeds had scorn for the wrath of a mortal boy. With a great toss of their mighty heads they had torn the guiding reins from his grasp, and as he stood, giddily swaying from side to side, Phaeton knew that the boon he had craved from his father must in truth be death for him.

And, lo, it was a hideous death, for with eyes that were like flames that burned his brain, the boy beheld the terrible havoc that his pride had wrought. That blazing chariot of the Sun made the clouds smoke, and dried up all the rivers and water-springs. Fire burst from the mountain tops, great cities were destroyed. The beauty of the earth was ravished, woods and meadows and all green and pleasant places were laid waste. The harvests perished, the flocks and they who had herded them lay dead. Over Libya the horses took him, and the desert of Libya remains a barren wilderness to this day, while those sturdy Ethiopians who survived are black even now as a consequence of that cruel heat. The Nile changed its course in order to escape, and nymphs and

nereids in terror sought for the sanctuary of some watery place that had escaped destruction. The face of the burned and blackened earth, where the bodies of thousands of human beings lay charred to ashes, cracked and sent dismay to Pluto by the lurid light that penetrated even to his throne.

All this Phaeton saw, saw in impotent agony of soul. His boyish folly and pride had been great, but the excruciating anguish that made him shed tears of blood, was indeed a punishment even too heavy for an erring god.

From the havoc around her, the Earth at last looked up, and with blackened face and blinded eyes, and in a voice that was harsh and very, very weary, she called to Zeus to look down from Olympus and behold the ruin that had been wrought by the chariot of the Sun. And Zeus, the cloud-gatherer, looked down and beheld. And at the sight of that piteous devastation his brow grew dark, and terrible was his wrath against him who had held the reins of the chariot. Calling upon Apollo and all the other gods to witness him, he seized a lightning bolt, and for a moment the deathless Zeus and all the dwellers in Olympus looked on the fiery chariot in which stood the swaying, slight, lithe figure of a young lad, blinded with horror, shaken with agony. Then, from his hand, Zeus cast the bolt, and the chariot was dashed into fragments, and Phaeton, his golden hair ablaze, fell, like a bright shooting star, from the heavens above, into the river Eridanus. The steeds returned to their master, Apollo, and in rage and grief Apollo lashed them. Angrily, too, and very rebelliously did he speak of the punishment meted to his son by the ruler of the Immortals. Yet in truth the punishment was a merciful one. Phaeton was only half a god, and no human life were fit to live after the day of dire anguish that had been his.

Bitter was the mourning of Clymene over her beautiful only son, and so ceaselessly did his three sisters, the Heliades, weep for their brother, that the gods turned them into poplar trees that grew by the bank of the river, and, when still they wept, their tears turned into precious amber as they fell. Yet another mourned for Phaeton—Phaeton “dead ere his prime.” Cycnus, King of Liguria, had dearly loved the gallant boy, and again and yet again he dived deep in the river and brought forth the charred fragments of what had once been the beautiful son of a god, and gave to them honourable burial. Yet he could not rest satisfied that he had won all that remained of his friend from the river’s bed, and so he continued to haunt the stream, ever diving, ever searching, until the gods grew weary of his restless sorrow and changed him into a swan.

And still we see the swan sailing mournfully along, like a white-sailed barque that is bearing the body of a king to its rest, and ever and anon plunging deep into the water as though the search for the boy who would fain have been a god were never to come to an end.

To Phaeton the Italian Naiades reared a tomb, and inscribed on the stone these words:

“Driver of Phœbus’ chariot, Phaëton, Struck by Jove’s thunder,
rests beneath this stone, He could not rule his father’s car of
fire, Yet was it much, so nobly to aspire.”

OVID.

End of Book Preview

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